



Federal agency holds health meetings in Libby

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HELENA – People in Libby, especially former workers at the now-defunct W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine, are at higher risk of developing asbestos-related diseases, federal officials reported Thursday.

"There were no surprises whatsoever," state Medical Officer Michael Spence said in a phone interview from Libby.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry held two town meetings in Libby on Thursday afternoon to share what it learned in the past two years of medical testing in the town. Friday, the agency will hold an open meeting to talk to Libby residents about health concerns

that may not have been addressed yet as part of an upcoming public health assessment.

Hundreds of Libby residents have become ill, and at least 200 have died because of exposure to asbestos linked to the W.R. Grace mine, which once provided more than 80 percent of the world's supply of vermiculite. The vermiculite was used in a number of products, including household insulation and garden soil conditioner.

Tremolite asbestos is a contaminant of the Libby vermiculite ore.

Since the illnesses were made public by news reports in 1999, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has moved in for emergency cleanup. This summer, the EPA took an unusual step and began removing asbestos

contamination from people's homes and yards. The town is slated to become an EPA Superfund site. Normally lengthy, that process will be considerably speeded up by Gov. Judy Martz's request to use the state's lone "silver bullet" for quick Superfund listing.

State and federal officials have stressed that the contamination in Libby does not make the entire town unsafe and that removing any further contamination from residents' homes is meant to protect people who already have been exposed to unusually high levels of asbestos from further exposure.

The agency began the testing program in 2000 and has been working with the town since.

Maria Teran-Maclver, an ATSDR

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community involvement specialist, said the agency wanted to present its preliminary information to the town "to make sure the community knows where we are in the process."

"We didn't want to wait until we had printed the report and had it in the bookshelf to give them the information," she said.

Of the 6,668 current and former Libby residents given X-ray screenings for asbestos diseases in the summers of 2000

and 2001, 18 percent had asbestos-related abnormalities in their lung linings, with the risk of abnormalities increasing with age and the length of time they had lived in Libby, the agency reported. The rate of abnormalities in those tested was at least 782 times the normal rate.

More serious abnormalities in the actual lung tissue were discovered in 0.8 percent of those receiving chest X-rays, the report said.

Mine workers, not surprisingly, were the most likely to show asbestos-related lung changes, with 51 percent showing

abnormalities in their lung lining and 3.8 percent showing abnormalities in their lung tissue, ATSDR officials said.

Even among those tested who could not recall any exposure to the vermiculite, the rate of abnormalities was more than twice that of the general population, the preliminary report said.

Breathing restrictions ranging from moderate to severe, the report said, were found in 1.8 percent of those given lung function tests. Among Grace workers, the rate was more than three times higher.

The ATSDR also gave

computed tomography, or CT, scans of the chest to 353 people to determine whether those scans work better than X-rays in finding signs of disease. The results indicated that the scans can help screening for people like workers and their families who are at high risk but whose chest X-rays are indeterminate.

The agency also presented the results of a mortality study released earlier this year, showing that, between 1979 and 1998, asbestos-related deaths were 40 to 80 times higher than expected. Most of those deaths, the study showed, could be attributed to on-the-job asbestos exposure.